

## **Overcoming The Sting Of Summer**

As summer comes to an end you may notice an increase in the number of stinging insects. A nest that had a few dozen bees and yellow jackets in July may have thousands in mid to late September, forcing people with stinging insect allergies to take extra precautions.

For most people, getting stung results in temporary redness and swelling at the site of the sting. However, for those with severe allergies to insect stings, it can result in a sudden severe reaction called anaphylaxis. Anaphylaxis is a medical emergency and may be fatal if not treated immediately.

More than 5 percent of Americans are at risk for anaphylaxis from stinging insects, according to the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology (AAAAI). The most common stinging insects in the United States include yellow jackets, honeybees, bumblebees, paper wasps, hornets and fire ants.

Symptoms of anaphylaxis can include itching and hives over large areas of the body, swelling in the throat or tongue, difficulty breathing, dizziness, stomach cramps, nausea and diarrhea. In severe cases, a rapid fall in blood pressure may result in shock and loss of consciousness and can cause death.

"Unfortunately most people don't even know they are allergic to insect stings until they actually experience an allergic reaction," according to allergist/immunologist David B.K. Golden, MD, FAAAAI, and past chair of the AAAAI Insect Allergy Committee. "When an allergic person is stung for the first time, his or her body produces an antibody called Immunoglobulin E (IgE). If they are stung again, the venom reacts with the IgE antibodies. This triggers the release of histamine and other chemicals that cause an allergic reaction."

However, some people may experience a severe allergic reaction after being stung only once, while in others, it may take several stings before a reaction occurs. This fact highlights the need for proper diagnosis and management to prevent a severe reaction from occurring.

### **Before The Sting**

It is important to take precautions before being stung to help avoid a potentially dangerous reaction:

- If you have experienced a severe reaction to insect stings or you think you may be allergic, consult with an allergist/immunologist to accurately diagnose your condition. An allergist/immunologist is the best qualified medical professional trained to manage the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of allergies and asthma. To find an allergist/immunologist in your area, call the AAAAI Physician Referral and Information Line at (800) 822-2762 or [www.aaaai.org/physref](http://www.aaaai.org/physref)

- Consider allergy shots, also known as immunotherapy treatment. Venom immunotherapy shots take effect within just a few months. Venom immunotherapy is the closest thing to a "cure" for allergic reactions. It is shown to be 97 percent effective in preventing future allergic reactions.

### **Preventing The Sting**

The following are steps that can be taken to keep from being stung when encountering flying stinging insects:

- Avoid the "territory" of the stinging insect's nest. These insects are most likely to sting if their homes are disturbed, so it is important to have hives and nests around your home destroyed. Since this activity can be dangerous, hire a trained exterminator.
- Remain calm and quiet, and slowly move away.
- Avoid brightly colored clothing and perfume when outdoors. Many stinging insects are searching for food and could confuse you with a flower.
- Be careful when cooking, eating or drinking sweet beverages like soda or juice outdoors. Keep food covered until eaten.
- Wear closed-toe shoes outdoors and avoid going barefoot.
- Avoid loose-fitting garments that can trap insects between material and skin.

### **After The Sting**

In the event that you are stung, the AAAAI recommends the following treatment tips to help alleviate the pain and take the proper actions in the event an allergic reaction occurs:

- Monitor carefully for symptoms of anaphylaxis. If you experience symptoms, call 911 to get emergency medical treatment.
- If you know you have a severe allergy, inject epinephrine immediately and call 911.
- If you are dizzy, lie flat on the ground until help arrives.
- Elevate the affected area and apply ice or a cold compress to reduce the pain and swelling.
- Gently clean blisters with soap and water to prevent secondary infections; do not break the blisters.
- Use topical steroid ointments or oral antihistamines to relieve itching.
- If a stinger has been left; Do not pinch the area to remove the stinger. This can result in more venom being released into the skin.

*Tips courtesy of the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology.*